Discover Islām

(Second Edition)

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Introducing Islām

There are few people on earth today who have not heard something about Islām. Yet, one is often surprised to learn that it is really quite different from his initial impression. For Islām is not as it is represented in the Western media, nor is it Arab culture, nor is it a religion in the sense of mere private conviction (or more often, speculation) concerning the state of existence.

Islām is very widely known in the West for whát it is not! Active slandering and tarnishing of Islām has become a mission and career for some groups in politics, in the media and the entertainment field. The average person has heard of or has read about Islām mostly through sources that are critical (even hostile), or writers who have had colonial or missionary motives, which have often given a certain slant to the interpretation of Islām in the western mind.

Islām is a voluntary relationship between an individual and his Creator. The outstanding difference between this and other religions is that Islām refuses to accept any form of creation whatsoever as a deity worthy of worship. It emphasizes the exclusive worship of the One who created the heavens and the earth, to whom all creation will finally return. It is not a new religion but the continuation and culmination of preceding monotheistic religion - the same truth revealed by God to every prophet. Hence, it is for all peoples and all times.

Who are the Muslims?

Over one and a half billion people (about one fourth of the world's population) from a vast range of races, nationalities and

cultures across the globe are united by the common Islāmic faith. Of these, about 18 percent live in the Arab world. The world's largest Muslim community is in Indonesia, and substantial parts of Asia and much of Africa are Muslim, while significant minorities are to be found in India, China, Russia, as well as North and South America, Europe and Oceania. For Muslims, Islām is both a religion and a complete way of life.

The Meaning of "Islām"

Of all the major religions of the world, Islām stands apart in that it does not derive its name from a tribe or person or locality; like Judaism (from Judah), or Christianity (from Christ) or Buddhism (from Buddha), or Hinduism (from the land of Hind, i.e., India). And Islām does not derive its name from the Prophet Muhammad. Muhammad is not worshipped, nor is he regarded as the founder of Islām or the author of its holy scripture, the Qur'ān. The term "Islām" occurs in more than one place in the Qur'ān itself. It is derived from the Arabic root (slm) which connotes "peace" or "submission". Indeed, the proper meaning of "Islām" is the attainment of peace, both inner and outer peace, by submission of oneself to the will of God (Allāh). This means conscious, loving and trusting submission, the acceptance of His grace and following of His path. In that sense the Muslim regards Islām not as a new religion that came in the seventh century with the advent of the Prophet Muhammad, but as a continuation of the basic mission of all prophets throughout history. That mission was perfected and made universal with the last of those prophets, Muhammad.

Islāmic Monotheism

Muslims do not have a separate god of their own whom they call "Allāh." The name "Allāh" has no connotation at all of a tribal, Arabian or even a Muslim god. "Allāh" simply means the one and only true, universal God of all. "Allāh" is a proper name belonging only to the one almighty God, Creator and Sustainer of the heavens and the earth and all that is within them, the Eternal and Absolute, to whom alone all worship is due. God states in the Qur'ān that His name is Allāh. Hence, Muslims refer to and call on Him by His proper name, Allāh[1].

What are the basic attributes of Allāh? The Qur'ān mentions the "best names" (or attributes) of Allāh. Instead of enumerating them all, we will examine a few. Some attributes emphasize the transcendence of Allāh. The Qur'ān repeatedly makes it clear that Allāh is beyond our limited perception: "*There is nothing like unto Him*[2]."(Qur'ān 42:11) "*Vision perceives Him not*[3], *but He perceives [all] vision.*"(Qur'ān 6:103) "*Nor is there to Him any equivalent.*"(Q 112:4) A Muslim never thinks of Allāh as having any particular image, whether physical, human, material or otherwise. Such attributes as "the all-Knowing," "the Eternal," "the Omnipotent," "the all-Encompassing," "the Just," and "the Sovereign" also emphasize transcendence. But this does not mean that Allāh is a mere

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[1] Therefore, the name "Allāh" will be used in preference to the word "God."

[2] There is no similarity whatsoever between the Creator and His creation in essence, in attributes or in deed.

[3] In the life of this world. The people of Paradise, however, will be able to see Allāh in the Hereafter.

philosophical concept or a deity far removed. Indeed, alongside this emphasis on the transcendence of Allāh, the Qur'ān also speaks of Allāh as a God who is close, easily approachable, kind, affectionate, loving, forgiving and merciful. The very first passage in the Qur'ān, repeated at the start of every chapter is "*In the name of Allāh, the Entirely Merciful, the Especially Merciful...*" The Qur'ān tells us that when Allāh created the first human He "*breathed into him from His [created] soul*[4]."(Q 32:9) and that Allāh is "*closer to him (the human) than [his] jugular vein.*"(Q 50:16) In another beautiful and moving passage we are told, "*And when My servants ask you, [O Muhammad], concerning Me – indeed I am near. I respond to the invocation of the supplicant when he calls upon Me. So let them respond to Me [by obedience] and believe in Me that they may be [rightly] guided.*"(Q 2:186)

For the Muslim, monotheism does not mean simply the oneness of God, but the absolute uniqueness of Allāh, which precludes the notion of anyone sharing in the godhead. The opposite of monotheism in Islām is called "*shirk*", an Arabic term meaning the association of another with Allāh in some aspect of divinity. It includes polytheism, dualism (one god for good or light and another for evil or darkness), and pantheism, the idea that God is within everything. All forms of god-incarnate philosophies are excluded by Islām's monotheism, as is blind obedience to dictators, clergy, or one's own whims and desires, rather than to the ordinances of God (Allāh). All these are regarded as forms of "associating" others with Allāh (*shirk*),

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[4] i.e., The element of life and soul which Allāh created for that body.

either by believing that some creatures of Allāh possess divinity or by believing that they share in the divine attributes of Allāh. To the Muslim, monotheism is not simply a dogma, thought or belief; it is something that deeply influences one's whole outlook on life.

What do Muslims Believe?

Muslims believe in one, unique, incomparable God, in the angels created by Him, in the prophets through whom His revelations were brought to mankind, in the Day of Judgement and individual accountability for actions, in God's complete authority over human destiny[5] (be it good or bad), and in life after death.

Allāh is the Creator and Sustainer of this universe. Since man cannot know his Creator through the physical senses, Allāh has revealed information abc

messengers and prophets. We are familiar with some of them through earlier scriptures such as the Torah and the Gospel. Every people on earth was at some time sent a messenger from Allāh, but with the passing of generations men tended to deviate from the true religion, often replacing it with alien ideas

[5] Allāh's knowledge encompasses every aspect of His creations in the past, present and future. Nothing occurs but with His knowledge, and by His will. Good and evil exist by Allāh's decree, and everyone earns one or the other through his own choice and by the exercise of his free will. Nonetheless, good occurs with the help of Allāh, while evil occurs, not against His will but by His leave, as a trial for mankind or as a result of his misdeeds.

and practices. Each prophet was sent to reform his people and turn them back to the worship of Allāh alone. The last of these prophets was Muhammad, through whom Allāh's message was completed. Allāh promised that this final message would be preserved for all mankind. And the words revealed by Allāh through the angel Gabriel to Prophet Muhammad have indeed been passed down to us in their original Arabic text, unchanged since the time of revelation. This scripture is called the Qur'ān.

The essence of Allāh's message through all of the prophets was: "*O mankind, worship Allāh; you have no deity other than Him.*" (Q 7:59,65,73,85; Also 11:50,61,84; and 23:23,32) Allāh further states that He made this life in order to test man so that every person may be recompensed after death for what he earned: " *[He] who created death and life to test you [as to] which of you is best in deed – and He is the Exalted in Might, the Forgiving.*" (Q 67:2) Allāh alone is the judge of human righteousness, and it is Allāh alone who rewards and punishes in this life and in the Hereafter.

Allāh is one. His unity is evident in the order, arrangement and symmetry of the universe. He is all-knowing and all-powerful. He is completely just and merciful. Allāh has revealed certain names and descriptions of Himself so that we may have some understanding of His qualities and therefore love, and at the same time, fear Him.

Nothing is worthy of worship except Him who created the universe - not stone idols or fire, not heavenly bodies such as the sun and moon, not animals, not angels, and not other men (including prophets) - for all of these are His creations.

This universe was not formed by chance, nor is it left to chance. Allāh created it for a purpose and subjected it to physical laws for an appointed period of time. Man was created for a purpose as well - to worship Allāh on earth and live according to His law. This is the essence of Islām. It is Allāh alone (who created us and knows us better than we know ourselves) who has the right to govern our lives. And His law means justice for all people regardless of gender, nationality, colour or social status. Human beings are judged only on the basis of righteousness.

Man has been given a free will and has been left the choice of whether or not he will follow the way of Allāh. Furthermore, he has been given a mind with which he is able to reason and choose wisely. One may, by his own efforts, gain knowledge that enables him to recognize the evidence of Allāh in His creation. By contemplation one may weigh, measure and learn from all situations. And finally, because the human mind and experience is limited, Allāh has revealed the guidance we need through prophets.

After making available the information necessary for one to choose His way, Allāh informs us in the Qur'ān that after passing through a temporary stage of death man will bear the consequences of his choice in a greater life to come: "*Every soul will taste death. And We test you with evil and with good as trial; and to Us you will be returned.*" (Q 21:35) Every individual is personally responsible for his own deeds - both good and evil. No one else can carry the burden of his sins.

On the other hand, Allāh is always prepared to accept and forgive any servant who has gone astray and then repents and

turns back to Him. The compensation for evil will be exact justice, but the compensation for good will be much greater - complete satisfaction and happiness.

This last message revealed by Allāh to mankind through Prophet Muhammad is the final and complete religion and legal code for mankind. Just as a new revised law supersedes and invalidates what came before it, Islām now nullifies all former religions on earth. It corrects the deviations that had crept into religion previously, in the realm of both belief and practice. The text of the Qur'ān has been preserved by Allāh in order that humanity may no longer have an excuse to deviate and that there may always be men who keep the true religion.

The final prophet sent by the Creator to mankind was an example to be followed and obeyed. Prophet Muhammad patterned his life on the teachings of the Qur'ān, which were revealed to him by Allāh. True Muslims try to follow this noble example. A high moral standard is clearly the goal of Islām. It is the duty of every Muslim to learn and put into practice all that he can of his religion in order to earn the pleasure of Allāh before returning to Him.

Muslims have two distinct advantages to help them in the practice of Islām as their way of life:

1. The sacred scripture, the Qur'ān, is the recorded words of Allāh, Himself, dictated verbatim to Prophet Muhammad in instalments through the angel Gabriel over a period of 23 years, between 610 and 633 AD. It was immediately memorised and put down in writing. It is divided into 114 chapters, called *surahs*. The Qur'ān still remains authentic in its original Arabic text, word for word and letter for letter. This language is used

males inherit more but ultimately they are by law financially responsible for many of their relatives: wives, children, parents if in need, young brothers and sisters if they have no income and no other person to provide for them, and in some cases other needy male and female relatives. Females inherit less but may retain their entire shares for investment and financial security without any legal obligation to spend any of it on themselves or anyone else, unless they do so voluntarily.

It should be noted that in pre-Islāmic society, women themselves were often inherited objects. (see Q 4:19) In some western countries, even after the advent of Islām, the whole estate of the deceased was passed on to the eldest son. The Qur'ān, however, made it clear that both men and women are entitled to a specified share of the estate of their deceased parents or close relatives: "*For men is a share of what the parents and close relatives leave, and for women is a share of what the parents and close relatives leave, be it little or much - an obligatory share.*" (Q 4:7)

(d) Employment: With regard to the woman's right to seek employment, it should first be stated that Islām regards her role in society as mother and wife to be her most sacred and essential one. Maids and baby sitters cannot possibly take the mother's place as the educator of an upright, complex-free and carefully-reared child. Such a noble and vital role, which largely shapes the future of nations, cannot be regarded as "idleness". However, there is no decree in Islām that forbids women from seeking employment whenever there is a necessity for it. Moreover, there is no restriction on benefiting from women's exceptional talents in any field. Some early jurists, such as Abu-Hanifah, At-Tabari and Ibn-Hazm, uphold

that a qualified Muslim woman may be appointed to the position of judge. Other jurists hold different opinions. Yet, no scholar can point to an explicit text in the Qur'ān or Sunnah that categorically excludes women from any lawful type of employment except for the headship of state (discussed later under "women in leadership positions"). 'Omar, the second caliph after Prophet Muhammad, appointed a woman (ash-Shifaa' bint 'Abdullah al-'Adawiyah) as marketplace supervisor, a position that is equivalent in our world to director of the Consumer Protection Department.

III. The Social Aspect

(a) As a daughter:

The Qur'ān ended the cruel pre-Islāmic practice of female infanticide with the threat: "*And when the girl [who was] buried alive is asked, for what sin she was killed.*" (Q 81:8-9)

The Qur'ān went further to rebuke the unwelcoming attitude of some parents upon hearing the news of the birth of a girl instead of a boy: "*And when one of them is informed of [the birth of] a female, his face becomes dark, and he suppresses grief. He hides himself from the people because of the ill of which he has been informed. Should he keep it in humiliation or bury it in the ground? Unquestionably, evil is what they decide.*" (Q 16:58-59)

Parents are duty-bound to support and show kindness and justice to their daughters. Prophet Muhammad said: "*Whoever has a daughter and does not bury her alive, does not insult her, and does not favour his son over her, Allāh will admit into Paradise;*" and "*Whoever supports two daughters until they mature, he and I will come on the Day of Judgment thus (and*

he pointed with his two fingers held together)." (Both *hadiths* narrated by Ahmad)

A crucial aspect in the upbringing of daughters that greatly influences their future is education. Education is not only a right but also a responsibility for all males and females. Prophet Muhammad said: "*Seeking knowledge is an obligation upon every Muslim.*" (Narrated by al-Bayhaqi and Ibn Majah)

Islām neither requires nor encourages female circumcision. And while it might be practiced by some Muslims in parts of Africa, it is also practiced in those places by other peoples, including Christians. In fact female circumcision did not originate in Islam but was practiced long before the rise of Islam, Christianity and possibly Judaism.[10]

(b) As a wife:

Marriage in Islām is based on mutual peace, love and compassion, and not the mere satisfying of human sexual desire (In Islam sexual relations are only allowed within marriage). Among the most impressive verses in the Qur'ān about marriage is the following: "*And of His signs is: that He created for you from yourselves mates that you may find tranquility in them; and He placed between you affection and mercy. Indeed in that are signs for a people who give thought.*" (Q 30:21, see also 42:11 and 2:228)

The female has the right to accept or reject marriage proposals. According to Islāmic *shari'ah* (law), a woman cannot be forced to marry anyone without her consent.

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[10] Stewart, Rosemary, "Female Circumcision: Implications for North American Nurses", *Journal of Psychosocial Nursing*, Vol. 35, no. 4, 1997, p. 35.

The husband is responsible for the maintenance, protection. and overall leadership (*qiwamah*) of the family. within the framework of consultation (Q 2:233) and kindness (Q 4:19). The mutuality and complementarity of husband and wife does not mean "subservience" by either party to the other. Prophet Muhammad instructed Muslims regarding women: "*I commend you to be kind to women;*" (Narrated by al-Bukhari and Muslim) and "*The best of you is the best to his wife.*" (Narrated by at-Termdhi) The Qur'ān urges husbands to be kind and considerate to their wives, even if a wife falls out of favour with her husband or disinclination for her arises within him: "*And live with them in kindness. For if you dislike them - perhaps you dislike a thing and Allah makes therein much good.*" (Q 4:19) It also outlawed the pre-Islāmic Arabian practice whereby the sons of the deceased inherited their father's widow(s) (their stepmothers) as if they were part of his estate. (see Q 4:19).

Should marital disputes arise, the Qur'ān encourages couples to resolve them privately in a spirit of fairness and probity. Under no circumstances does the Qur'ān encourage, allow, or condone family violence or physical abuse. In the extreme case of a rebellious wife, and whenever greater harm, such as divorce, is a likely option, it allows for a husband to administer a benign slap to his wife in a way that does not touch the face, causes no physical harm to the body nor leaves any sort of mark, making it more of a symbolic measure than a punitive one. It may serve, in some cases, to bring to the wife's attention the seriousness of her continued unreasonable behavior, and may be resorted to *only* after exhausting other steps outlined in the Qur'ān in 4:34. If that measure is not likely to prevent a marriage from collapsing, it should not be resorted to. Prophet

with the final revelation (i.e., the Qur'ān) to all of mankind as guidance for humanity until the Day of Judgement.

Prophet Muhammad is the spokesman for Allāh by His authority. Muhammad's duty was not only to deliver the message which Allāh revealed but also to explain it and put it into practice as an example to be followed by mankind. Thus, the Qur'ān and the authentic *Sunnah* (sometimes referred to as *hadeeth*) are the two main sources of Islāmic *sharī'ah* (law). *Sunnah* refers to the words, actions and confirmations (consent) of Prophet Muhammad in matters pertaining to the meaning and practice of Islām. It is based upon revelation from Allāh.

In the Qur'ān, Allāh has made obedience to the Prophet mandatory upon the believers. The teachings of Prophet Muhammad, i.e., his sayings and traditions related and recorded by those who actually witnessed or heard them, have been carefully scrutinised concerning the reliability of their transmitters. Only those are accepted whose chain of narrators is known to be completely reliable and sound.

Acceptance of Prophet Muhammad as the final messenger sent by Allāh to complete His religion upon the earth eliminates belief in any claim to Prophethood after him. Thus, a Muslim completely rejects the claims of all false prophets. The Qur'ān states: "*Muhammad is not the father of [any] one of your men, but [he is] the Messenger of Allāh and seal [i.e., last] of the prophets. And ever is Allāh, of all things, Knowing.* "(Q 33:40)

Salāh (Regular Prayer)

Salāh is the Arabic term for prayer, referring specifically to the particular manner in which Muslims perform it by standing, bowing and prostrating. No other form of worship can be

compared to *Salāh*, for it is the basis of religion. *Salāh* puts Muslims in continuous communication with their Creator, while providing a constant reminder of their higher moral and spiritual mission in life. *Salāh* (prayer) was practised in some form by the earlier prophets and their followers as an essential part of the religion of Allāh. Islām, which is the final stage, the completion and confirmation of monotheistic religion, considers *Salāh* (prayer) essential, and its denial removes one from the ranks of Islām.

Obligatory prayers are performed five times a day: at dawn, noon, mid-afternoon, sunset, and nightfall and are a direct link between the worshipper and Allāh. The prayer may be performed at any clean place (home, mosque, park, the workplace, etc) by an individual or by a group. There is no hierarchical authority or priesthood in Islām, so group prayers are led by a person learned in the Qur'ān. These prayers, whether performed in congregation or individually, contain verses from the Qur'ān and are said in Arabic, the language of the revelation. Personal supplications, however, can be offered in one's own language. Islāmic prayer takes a special form and content, in which both body and soul are harmoniously involved; each prayer is practically speaking, an audience with Allāh. Prayer, both obligatory and voluntary, is an immense spiritual treasure to be tapped. It inspires peace, purity and tranquillity, and instils a continuous awareness of and feeling of closeness to Allāh. It amazingly reduces the hustle-and-bustle of life to tame proportions. By their spacing throughout five times a day, beginning at dawn, prayers help worshippers to maintain a therapeutic level of well-being and practically leave

no room in their consciousness for mischievous thoughts and deeds.

Zakāh (Required Expenditure)

One of the most important principles of Islām is that all things belong to Allāh and that wealth is therefore held by human beings in trust. Spending money in charity is highly commendable, and Muslims are encouraged to spend as much as they can. But zakāh, the third pillar of Islām, is different because it is obligatory, not voluntary, and it is given in a calculated amount. Each Muslim calculates his or her own *zakāh* individually. For most purposes this involves the payment each year of two and a half percent of the capital in excess of one's basic needs. The same percentage is paid annually by those who own merchandise for sale. An amount of *zakāh* is also given by those who own livestock and harvest agricultural produce in certain quantities, or extract valuable materials from mines or buried treasures. *Zakāh* is the right of the poor from the wealth of the rich and represents the unbreakable bond between members of the community. The word *zakāh* stands for purification and growth, meaning that one purifies his wealth by giving the needy their just portion of it. When Muslims give *zakāh*, they have the genuine feeling that it is an investment and not a loss.

Siyām (Fasting the Month of Rama<u>dh</u>ān)

The month of *Rama<u>dh</u>an* (which can be either 29 or 30 days) is part of the Islāmic lunar year, which is eleven days shorter than the solar year, so *Rama<u>dh</u>ān* rotates throughout the seasons, a blessing which insures that Muslims in neither the northern nor

southern hemispheres will permanently be required to fast for longer or shorter hours or in hotter or colder weather. From dawn to sunset during each day of *Ramadhān,* Muslims abstain from eating, drinking, smoking and sexual activities in obedience to Allāh's command; and during the fast one should not exhibit anger or any other misbehaviour. Those who are ill, travelling, elderly, pregnant or nursing mothers (if there is a risk to their health or their babies') are permitted to break the fast and make up an equal number of days later. If they are physically unable to make up the fast, they must feed a needy person for every day missed if financially able. As they conquer the influence of daily habits and endure hunger and thirst, fasting trains Muslims in practicing obedience to Allāh, patience in times of hardship and compassion and responsibility toward the poor. As a form of worship, fasting becomes a very enriching experience as one transcends the needs of his material component and cherishes the spiritual, enabling the conscientious Muslim to deepen his/her relationship with Allāh. The month is a period of spiritual renewal and revitalisation, similar to charging one's batteries for the rest of the year. Intensified worship, charity, and study of the Qur'ān are features of this month.

Hajj (Pilgrimage to Makkah)

Islām relates profoundly to the monotheistic mission of Prophet Ibrāheem (Abraham). It's fifth pillar (*hajj*) is a formal commemoration of the Prophet Ibrāheem's obedience to Allāh. Ibrāheem was ordained by Allāh to build the *Ka'bah* (the first house on earth for the worship of Allāh) with the assistance of his first son, Prophet Ismā'eel (Ishmael), at the site of Makkah

Muhammad, who is the model example of Muslims, never hit any of his wives and he said: *"They are not the best of you who hit their wives"*.(Narrated by Abu-Dawud) In the event that disputes cannot be resolved equitably between husband and wife, the Qur'ān prescribes mediation between the parties through family intervention on behalf of both spouses (see Q 4:35). In that way, the Qur'ān outlines an enlightened approach for the husband and wife to resolve persistent conflict in their marital life.

Divorce is a last resort, permissible but not encouraged. Yet the Qur'ān gives preference to the preservation of faith and the male and female individual's right to felicity. Forms of marriage dissolution include: (a) an enactment based upon mutual agreement, (b) the husband's initiative, (c) the wife's initiative (if included in her marital contract), (d) the court's decision on a wife's initiative for a legitimate reason (e.g. the husband's failure to support his wife, impotence or abuse), and (e) the wife's initiative (*khul'*, or divestiture) in cases in which there is "no fault" on the part of the husband but she dislikes him. This requires that she returns her marriage gift or a similar compensation. When the continuation of the marriage relationship is impossible for any reason, men are still taught to seek a gracious end to it. The Qur'ān states: "*And when you divorce women and they have [nearly] fulfilled their term [i.e., waiting period], either retain them according to acceptable terms or release them according to acceptable terms, and do not keep them, intending harm, to transgress [against them].*" (Q 2:231, see also 2:229 and 33:49)

Priority for the custody of young children (up to the age of about seven) is given to the mother. A judge later may extend

the mother's custody or give the child the choice to choose the mother or father as his or her custodian. Custody questions are to be settled in a manner that balances the interests of both parents and the well-being of children.

Associating polygyny with Islām (as if it was introduced by it or is the norm according to its teachings) is one of the most persistent myths perpetuated in Western literature and media. Polygyny has existed in almost all nations and was even sanctioned by Judaism and Christianity until recent centuries.[11] Islām did not outlaw polygyny, rather, it regulated and restricted it. It is neither required nor encouraged, but simply permitted with conditions. The Qur'ān is the only revealed scripture that explicitly limited polygyny and discouraged its practice by imposing stringent conditions. One reason for not categorically forbidding polygyny is that in different places at different times, there may exist individual or social exigencies which make polygyny a better option than either divorce or a hypocritical monogamy while indulging in illicit relations. The spirit of Islāmic *shari'ah* also includes dealing with individual and collective contingencies that may arise from time to time (e.g., imbalances between the number of males and females created by wars). This provides a moral, practical and humane solution to the problems of widows and orphans, who would otherwise be vulnerable in the absence of a husband and father

[11] See, for example, Westermarck, Edward A., *The History of Human Marriage*, (5th Revised ed), 1925, vol. 3, pp. 42-43 gives numerous examples of the sanctioning of polygyny among Jews, Christians and others; also *Encyclopedia Biblica,* 1925, vol 3, p. 2946.

figure. In terms of economics, companionship, proper child rearing and other needs, polygyny provides a solution.

It is critically important to point that all parties involved have options. Men may choose to remain monogamous. A considered second wife may reject the marriage proposal if she does not wish to be party to a polygynous marriage. A prospective first wife may include in her marital contract a condition that her husband shall practice monogamy. If this condition is accepted, it becomes binding on the husband. Should he later violate this condition, his first wife will be entitled to seek divorce with all the financial rights connected with it. If such a condition was not included in the marital contract, and the husband marries a second wife, the first wife may still seek *khul'* (divestiture).

(c) As a mother:

The Qur'ān elevates kindness to parents and especially mothers to a status second only to the worship of Allāh: "And your Lord has decreed that you not worship except Him, and to parents, good treatment. Whether one or both of them reach old age [while] with you, say not to them [so much as], "uff," [an expression of disapproval or irritation] and do not repel them but speak to them a noble word. And lower to them the wing of humility out of mercy and say, "*My Lord, have mercy upon them as they brought me up [when I was] small.*" (Q 17:23-24. See also 31:14, 46:15 and 29:8)

Naturally, Prophet Muhammad specified this behavior for his followers, rendering to mothers an unequalled status in human relationships: "*The most worthy of kindness is the mother, the mother, the mother and then the father!*" (Narrated by al-Bukhari)

(d) As a sister in faith:

According to Prophet Muhammad. "*women are but sisters (shaqa'iq, or twin halves) of men.*" (Narrated by Ahmad and at-Termdhi) This *hadeeth* is a profound statement that directly relates to the issue of human equality between the genders. If the first meaning of *shaqa'iq* is adopted, it means that a male is one half (of society). with the female the other half. Can "one half" be better or bigger than the other half? Is there a more simple but profound physical image of equality? If the second meaning, "sisters," is adopted, it implies the same.

Prophet Muhammad taught kindness, care and respect toward women in general: "I commend you to be kind to women" (Narrated by al-Bukhari and Muslim). It is significant that such instruction of the Prophet was among his final instructions and reminders in the "farewell pilgrimage" address given shortly before his passing away.

(e) Modesty and social interaction:

The parameters of proper modesty for males and females (dress and behavior) are based on revelatory sources (the Qur'ān and authentic *Sunnah*) and, as such, are regarded by believing men and women as divinely-based injunctions and guidelines with legitimate aims and divine wisdom behind them. They are neither male-imposed nor socially imposed restrictions (see Q 24:30-31, 33:59, 33:32 and also the numerous statements by Prophet Muhammad on this subject).

The Islāmic dress code (the *hijab*) requires the Muslim woman to cover her entire body except the face and hands when in public or when in front of men who are not permanently prohibited to her in marriage because of a blood

and made you peoples and tribes that you may know one another. Indeed, the most noble of you in the sight of Allāh is the most righteous of you. Indeed, Allāh is Knowing and Acquainted."(Q 49:13)

What is the Meaning of "Jihād"?

Islām prohibits compulsion in the acceptance of religion (Q 2:256), and it prohibits aggression as well: "*And cooperate in righteousness and piety, but do not cooperate in sin and aggression.*" (Q 5:2) However, Islām allows fighting in self-defence, against occupation and oppression and on behalf of those who have been expelled forcibly from their homes: "*Fight in the way of Allāh those who fight you but do not transgress. Indeed, Allāh does not like transgressors.*"(Q 2:190) The often misunderstood and overused term *jihād* literally means "*struggle*" and not "holy war." *Jihād*, as an Islāmic concept, may be on a personal level, an inner struggle against evil within oneself; a struggle for decency and goodness on the social level; or a struggle on the battlefield when necessary.

The Status and Rights of Women

Perhaps one of the most misunderstood concepts about Islām today is that of the status and role of women. Many practices in the Muslim world today are merely customs and have nothing to do with Islām. The truth is that Islām brought revolutionary changes to women's rights. For the first time, the souls of women were explicitly declared in a sacred book to be equal to those of men (Q 4:1). Rights and obligations are equally bestowed upon them both (Q 3:195).

Islām gave women complete economic independence before and after marriage. They are under no obligation to share in family expenses; the husband bears the full responsibility regardless of how wealthy his wife may be. The Muslim woman has the right to a specified gift from her husband at marriage, she may determine its value, and she can handle it as she pleases.

Islāmic *sharī'ah* gave women the right to choose their own husbands and to initiate divorce. Muslim girls have the right to be educated, and it is the duty of those raising them to provide education.

In Islām, both men and women are entitled to a specified share of the estate of their deceased parents or close relatives (Q 4:7), whereas in some western countries until recent times the whole estate of the deceased was passed on to the eldest son. Both genders are entitled to specific rights before the law and courts of law; justice is genderless (Q 5:38, 24:2, 5:45). Women also possess an independent legal entity in financial and other matters. (In contrast, the right of independent ownership was not given to women in Europe until the late 19th and the 20th centuries.)

The general rule in social and political life is the participation and collaboration of males and females in public affairs (Q 9:71). There is historical evidence of participation by Muslim women in the choice of rulers (a right Western women only recently obtained), public issues, lawmaking, administrative positions, scholarship and teaching, and even in the battlefield. In Islām, women even have the right to directly question their head-of-state, as is evident in history.

The West has in recent years become obsessed by the Muslim woman's dress. The parameters of proper modesty for males and females (dress and behaviour) are based on the Qur'ān (24:30-31, 33:59, 33:32) and *Sunnah* with legitimate aims and divine wisdom behind them. They are neither male-imposed nor socially imposed restrictions. Muslim women wear the "*hijāb*" (covering of the whole body except the face and hands) when in public out of devotion and obedience to the command of God. It is a part of their religious practice, neither a symbol nor a political statement. In dressing modestly, a woman also forces others to judge her by her intellect, integrity and personality, in other words, herself, and is no longer valued only for her looks.

Men are also required to dress modestly, although the extent of covering is less. Western culture teaches that for things to be fair between the two sexes, they must be identical. Although men and women are equal in the sight of God, Islām acknowledges that they are physically, biologically and emotionally different, and therefore some aspects of life, including dress, are different for each.

For 1400 years Islām has given woman rights of which she was deprived in other religions, and which women in the West only recently started to obtain after a long struggle.

Accountability and Salvation

The Qur'ān teaches us that the human race has been given an innate pure nature called "*fitrah.*" Knowledge of Allāh and innate spirituality are inherent in human existence, but spirituality can betray us if it is not led in the right direction. To depend only on a human sense of the "guiding spirit" is dangerous. Many groups, even cults, claim to be guided by God

or by inspiration, yet these groups hold divergent, even conflicting beliefs. We find people behaving in contradictory ways who claim, nonetheless, that they are doing the will of God. "I feel," they say, "that the Holy Spirit guides and directs me." However, human beings have been endowed with an intellect to be used, not put on the shelf. A credible source of revelation is imperative. The Qur'ān strongly rejects viewpoints based on myth, illusion, ignorance, blind imitation of others, conjecture, prejudice, whims and worldly desires. In fact, Allāh confirms that most people on earth have gone astray through ignorance, conjecture and supposition: "*And if you obey most of those upon the earth, they will mislead you from the way of Allāh. They follow not except assumption, and they are not but falsifying.*"(Q 6:116)

The Muslim does not see human existence here on earth as punishment for eating from the forbidden tree. That event is regarded as an experiential lesson for Adam and Eve before they came to this earth. The Qur'ān teaches that even before the creation of the first human it was Allāh's plan to establish human life and civilisation on earth (Q 2:30). Thus, the Muslim does not view man as completely evil nor as completely good, but rather as a responsible being.

How can we humans, from the Islāmic perspective, overcome sin? The Qur'ān teaches that this life is a test and that earthly life is temporary (Q 67:2). The Muslim believes in resurrection, accountability, and the Day of Judgement. He knows that there is reward and punishment, that there is life hereafter and that reward or punishment do not necessarily wait until the Day of Judgement, but begin immediately after burial.

To demand perfection in order to gain salvation is not realistic. It would be demanding the impossible and is therefore unjust. Islām teaches a person to be humble and to realize that he cannot achieve salvation by his own righteousness. The reconciliation of the imperfect human being with Allāh is contingent on three elements: the grace and mercy of Allāh, good deeds and correct belief. Correct belief and good deeds are prerequisites for Allāh's forgiveness and for rising above our common shortcomings.

How can sin be removed? The Qur'ān gives the prescription: "*And whoever does a wrong or wrongs himself but then seeks forgiveness of Allāh will find Allāh Forgiving and Merciful.*"(Q 4:110) "*Indeed, good deeds do away with misdeeds.*"(Q 11:114) "*But indeed, I am the Perpetual Forgiver of whoever repents and believes and does righteousness and then continues in guidance.*"(Q 20:82) Islām teaches repentance: stopping evil ways, feeling regret for what one has done, and determining to follow the path of Allāh as much as humanly possible. There is no necessity for the sacrifice of a human being to wash away sins, only sincere repentance. The Qur'ān puts it clearly: "*My mercy encompasses all things.*"(Q 7:156) Another passage reads: "*Say,*" *O My servants who have transgressed against themselves [by sinning], do not despair of the mercy of Allāh. Indeed, Allāh forgives all sins [for those who repent and correct themselves]. Indeed, it is He who is the Forgiving, the Merciful.*"(Q 39:53)

Implication for the Non-Muslim

Allāh (God) makes it incumbent on Muslims to convey His message to all humanity in its final form, the Qur'ān. We are not talking here about conversion, merely enlightenment. Indeed, to turn to Islām, the religion of all the prophets, is not to turn one's back on preceding prophets. It does not involve changing one's basic spiritual nature. In the Qur'ān, pure human nature is a "Muslim" nature, which knows its Lord and wishes to submit to Him. The Qur'ān states: "*There shall be no compulsion in [acceptance of] the religion. The right course has become clear from the wrong.* "(Q 2:256)

How Does One Become a Muslim?

To become a Muslim a person simply needs to pronounce the *shahadah* (declaration of faith) with sincere conviction: "*Ash-hadu al-lā ilāha ill-Allāh, wa ash-hadu anna Muhammadan rasūlullāh* ". *This means, "I testify that there is no deity [worthy of worship] except Allāh, and I testify that Muhammad is the messenger of Allāh."*

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2- www.sultan.org
3- www.beconvinced.com
4- www.Islamworld.net

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